

Journal Writing for Improved Learning and Classroom Relationships in Public Schools: Applications for Disadvantaged Adults

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Literature Review

This review is an exploration into whether classroom methods similar to those applied by K-12 teachers are valid for adults and can be successfully applied to classrooms for disadvantaged adults: specifically, journal writing as a tool for improving learning and classroom relationships. The literature dispels the myth that teaching adults differs in every way from teaching children. The reviewed literature and research combine to support the use of journal writing for disadvantaged adult learners.

Keywords: Adult Education, Journal Writing, Classroom Techniques

Much research has been conducted to determine how students in K-12 classrooms benefit from journal writing in the classroom. At the same time, there exists a myth that teaching adults differs in every way from teaching children (Apps, 1991). However, the truth is that educators have the ability to expand the research that is valid regarding pedagogy in order to develop effective adult teaching methods. Further, the practice of journal writing that has been shown in existing research literature to improve the relationships within disadvantaged public school classrooms can be applied to the disadvantaged adult classroom.

The Myth Regarding Teaching Methods for Adults vs. Children

Little attention has been paid to the research and practice regarding teaching methods and teaching tools in public schools by those scholars, researchers and writers involved in adult education (Apps, 1991). Apps goes on to say that public school teachers have, in fact, improved education in surprising ways such as education technology usage and application of real life situations to the learning environment. He concludes that educators of children may be using more enlightened teaching methods but he states that adult educators are also taking a fresh approach to teaching. There is actually little difference in the methods and tools an instructor can use for educating these two groups of learners.

At the basic level, the psychological differences between children and adults that would account for learning differences may not exist at all. Some life-span theories that presume differences between age groups are unclear or poorly defined and remain untestable and incomplete (Cavanaugh, 1990). This further supports the idea that the teaching of adults does not differ very much from teaching children and that the first myth listed in Apps' book is, indeed, a myth. Cavanaugh also explains that problems with applying life span theories for adult development exist because humans do not all develop at the same rate. If there are disadvantaged adults who are psychologically at the same level of development as middle school children or high school students, some of the methods for teaching such individuals would not differ at all. With this conclusion, we may select and apply successful childhood teaching methods and tools in disadvantaged adult classrooms.

Classroom Relationships

When Erin Gruwell began teaching English to disadvantaged teens she was determined to help them learn. In the process of doing so she found that relationships within the classroom were the dynamic by which the learning would take place (Haglund, 1998). Without the sincere dedication of an instructor to the students, and the formation of a true bonding relationship, she knew that the students in a classroom of disadvantaged students would fail to learn. Gruwell's dedication to her students was critical to her teaching effectiveness and to their success in learning.

Teacher/Student Relationships

Knowles (2005) discusses concepts of teaching theories and agrees with Carl Rogers' position that the better form of instructing is facilitating learning rather than imparting knowledge and that the most critical element in this

process is the personal relationship between the instructor and the learner. Carl Rogers (1969) said that the facilitator with a basic philosophy of trust toward the learner will set the correct mood or climate for learning. He also stated that a facilitator of learning works to form a relationship with the student that is one best described as counselor or advisor and, in turn, shares his or her own feelings, giving feedback to the student. A best case scenario may be a reciprocal exchange, but one in which the facilitator takes the leader role by remaining alert to the feelings of the learner and to his or her own feelings that may work against the process, making corrections along the way (Rogers, 1969).

Heron (2003) conducted interviews with ninth graders attending a summer education program to determine what they valued most about attending school. Most often the one thing that the students cited as being the most valuable was the relationship with their teachers. Heron determined that a positive relationship with a teacher, the feeling of being welcome in the classroom, and teachers with high expectations of the students were the conditions necessary for student participation. The teachers in the Heron study spent time attempting to form relationships with students who were, for the most part, disinterested in school. There were times when the teachers spent most of their time lecturing to the students. As one student stated in the exit interview:

What makes me bored is that, like some of them just sit there and lecture, the same lecture every day, constantly, back to back, you know it word by word ... and that's what makes me bored, not like having hands-on experiences. They sit there and talk to you, like, not letting us do the work ourselves (Heron, 2003).

This method of teaching was found not to be conducive to a good relationship or to successful learning. The students in this study, during exit interviews with Heron, stated a definite preference for science and other laboratory courses over language arts because they had better interactions with teachers while they were actually performing tasks. And while the teachers meant well with their question sessions after these lectures about teen pregnancy and gangs, the students had not yet formed the relationships necessary to openly discuss their ideas and thoughts aloud about such issues to the teachers. Perhaps the journal writing should have been used as a way of beginning the difficult conversations. This could have led to a more solid base for a positive relationship. As Erin Gruwell discovered, students will usually write what they will not say out loud (Filipoviz, 1999).

Relationships Among Students

One of the first things that a teacher will notice in the classroom is the relationships among students. While sometimes no relationships exist at all when a class begins, over time or in situations in which students already know each other there can be extremely negative relationships that exist. Such was the case when Erin Gruwell encountered the students in her first high school classroom (Haglund, 1998). Gruwell entered a situation in which there were both overt and covert forms of racism among students, including the circulation around the classroom of drawings of classroom members of certain races with physical features drawn in what she found to be an exaggerated, stereotypical manner (Filipoviz, 1999). Gruwell worked with these students over the course of the school year with the goal of seeing them overcome their prejudices by getting to know each other as individuals and not just members of differing racial groups. By the time their freshman year was completed, the students had not only learned from one another but also had become comfortable with one another in the classroom which, in turn, assisted their learning (Haglund, 1998).

By the end of the sophomore year, the students were enthusiastic about their learning and they began petitioning the school board to allow Gruwell to be permitted to teach them all again, as a class, the following year. It was important to the students that they not only remain with Gruwell but also with each other. Upon investigation of the matter, the board agreed that the benefits of bending the rules to allow a new teacher to instruct at the junior and senior level outweighed the objections of two other teachers and that the classroom should remain intact (Filipoviz, 1999). Gruwell had recognized the importance of relationships among learners and had succeeded in showing the students how to form the bonds necessary to their success in learning.

Surbeck (1994) identified journal writing as a tool for learning, specifically for the preparation of new teachers. Two educators of future teachers succeeded in their efforts to add journal writing to an existing teaching program in an attempt to bring the traditional curriculum to a more active and engaging level. Early in the semester, the instructors discovered that the students would stay in the classroom well into their lunch hours if given an opportunity for open dialogue with the two instructors. The instructors decided to extend the open dialogue for the entire semester by requiring the students to keep a learning journal.

Improved Relationships and Improved Learning with Journal Writing

As Surbeck (1994) discovered, learners become more engaged in the learning process when a journal is used for reflection, brainstorming, content clarity and, especially, forming a bond with the instructor. The instructors would read and respond to entries. In this way, they were continuing to share thoughts and experiences. In the process, the student teachers increased their learning. This teaching method was very successful and modified for future use in the program.

Similarly, Erin Gruwell credits her success with the disadvantaged learners in her high school class in part to the use of journal writing (Filipoviz, 1999). Beginning the first week of class was difficult for Gruwell as she attempted to work with her classroom of disinterested, angry and unresponsive students. But after implementing journal writing and telling the students to write what they felt and that she would only read them if the student wanted her to read their entries, Gruwell was able to gain the trust of the students, enough so that they would listen to her. In fact, they began to become interested in the journal writings of others, including Anne Frank's diary, a subject which was part of the curriculum for that semester (Filipoviz, 1999). The use of journal writing was directly related to the class subjects and the students' learning increased.

Apps (1991) discusses journal writing as a tool for teachers to aid them in continuing to learn to teach well. In this sense, it is not only a teaching tool but an actual learning tool for adults. It is a learning tool that helps to clarify values and to assist with the creation of new ideas. Gruwell implemented journal writing for her students in much the same way: she used journal writing as a way of helping the students connect their school lives to what was expected of them and to ideas and events in history and in the real world outside of their own inner-city existence (Haglund, 1998). She also used it to get to know her students to gain their trust and to form the necessary positive relationship for the level of learning she wanted the students to attain.

Research shows that reflective journal writing improves information synthesis skills (Hettich, 1976). Via journal writing, students are "able to ask questions, admit confusion, make connections, and grow ideologically", thus improving critical thinking skills (Good, 1999). Cisero (2006) explains that journal writing is not a tool for exam preparation but is useful for improving reading and content engagement skills. Further, Cisero found that students who are not necessarily intrinsically motivated and high achieving will benefit most from journal writing, making it a useful tool for classrooms for disadvantaged students.

Heron (2003) found that journal writing need not be repetitious or planned. In the course of her study there came a time when the students were not interested in what one of the instructors was teaching and so she had them put away the materials and begin writing a letter to their parents explaining why they were not interested in the content of the class and why they would not be successful in the program that summer. This was an impromptu writing exercise designed to get them thinking about why they might not be learning and what was holding them back from learning the material. This type of reflective, unplanned journaling can revitalize the learning experience when instructors feel that students need an exercise in reflection.

Conclusions

Journal writing is a tool for improving learning and classroom relationships for adults, specifically disadvantaged adults. Because research indicates that the tools and methods for childhood learning can be successfully applied as andragogical methods, and one of the best methods for expanding the minds of disadvantaged children is through the use of journals, journal writing can be implemented for disadvantaged adults in the classroom. Disadvantaged adults will benefit from improved relationships with their instructors as well as with other students and, likewise, their learning will improve. The methods of teaching that are effective for children can absolutely be successfully applied to adult education, especially reflective journal writing.

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